Rhetorical Question or Assertion?  
The Pragmatics of הֲלֹא in Biblical Hebrew

ADINA MOSHAVI  
Bar-Ilan University

1. Introduction
It has been claimed that the form הֲלֹא (also written הֲלוֹא or הֲלֹא) is homonymous in Biblical Hebrew, representing, on the one hand, the combination of interrogative ה and negative לו (“is it not?”), and, on the other hand, an indivisible particle that is neither interrogative nor negative. The latter particle is generally held to be asseverative in nature and is believed to be similar in its use to הוּא. In a previous article I presented syntactic evidence confirming the existence of this particle in Biblical Hebrew (henceforth BH). It was shown there that non-interactive, non-negative הֲלֹא belongs to the

1. I would like to thank the editors for their helpful comments on this paper.
3. Moshavi, “Syntactic Evidence.” As discussed briefly there (n. 5), scholars are divided as to whether the clausal adverb הֲלֹא is historically related to the interrogative and negative particles, or has an unrelated etymological origin. The interested reader is referred to Brown, “Is it Not?” and Sivan and Schniedewind, “Letting Your ‘Yes’ Be ‘No’” for the details of the argument. From a synchronic point of view, the etymological debate is irrelevant since the end result, a non-interactive adverb, is the same according to both hypotheses.
syntactic class of clausal adverbs, a class that includes adverbs such as הִנֵּה “behold,” לָכֵן “therefore,” and וְאוּלָם “whereas.”

A major obstacle in investigating the function of the clausal adverb הֲלֹא lies in distinguishing between the two homonymous forms. Although interrogative and non-interrogative הֲלֹא are disambiguated in certain syntactic environments, as discussed in section 2, the two are often syntactically indistinguishable. In the present article it is shown that pragmatic evidence regarding discourse context can often be used to successfully identify the clausal adverb when syntactic evidence is unavailable. A tentative pragmatic characterization of the clausal adverb is then presented based on its use in these contexts.

2. Syntactic Environments that Disambiguate Interrogative and Non-interrogative הֲלֹא

As shown in an earlier article, a number of syntactic constructions disambiguate the interrogative-negative combination and the clausal adverb הֲלֹא in the classical BH prose corpus (Genesis–2 Kings). One construction is the preposed finite non-subordinate clause, i.e., the clause in which a subject, object or adjunct precedes the verb. The clausal adverb הֲלֹא precedes the preposed constituent, as in (1), whereas the negative particle ordinarily follows the preposed constituent, even when the clause contains an interrogative הֲלֹא, as in (2).

(1) Judg. 4:14

הֲלֹא the LORD is going out before you.

(2) Gen. 18:25

Will the ruler of the world not do justice?

Finite clauses with initial conditional clauses disambiguate the two forms as well. The clausal adverb הֲלֹא precedes a conditional clause:


5. The conclusions presented in Mosha, “Syntactic Evidence” are summarized here. In cases where insufficient data from within the classical BH prose corpus is available, examples are given from books outside the classical BH prose corpus.

6. Translations are my own, based on the NJPS and NRSV. Additional examples from the classical prose corpus are Gen. 20:5, 29:25, 31:15; Deut. 31:17; Josh. 22:20; Judg. 6:13, 11:7; 1 Kgs. 1:13. There are many additional occurrences of this construction in the larger biblical corpus. There is a hypothetical possibility that some of these are interrogative clauses in which the negative precedes a focused preposed element (for Judg. 14:14, the closest English equivalent would be “Is it not the Lord [as opposed to someone else] who is going out before you?”). Strict pragmatic constraints on the “focus of negation” construction, however, preclude its relevance for most הֲלֹא clauses with preposed constituents, including Judg. 14:14. For further discussion, see Mosha, Word Order, 136–40; Mosha, “Syntactic Evidence,” 11, n. 9.

The conditional clause may of course be negated.

The negative particle (when part of the apodosis) and interrogative את, in contrast, both follow a conditional clause, as in (4) and (5).

(4) Gen. 43:5

And if you do not let [him] go, we will not go down.

(5) Hag. 2:13

If someone defiled by a corpse touches any of these, will it be defiled?

The clausal adverb and the negative particle are also disambiguated in finite clauses involving left-dislocation (*casus pendens*). The clausal adverb את precedes a left-dislocated element (6), whereas the negative particle follows (7):

(6) Judg. 11:24

what Chemosh your God gives you, that is what you possess.

(7) Gen. 2:17

And the tree of knowledge of good and evil, do not eat from it.

Finally, when את occurs in front of a constituent connected to the rest of the clause by a conjunction, it is clearly a clausal adverb:

8. An additional example is Gen. 4:7, although the syntactic structure of the double conditional there is open to a number of interpretations.

9. Numerous additional examples of this construction can be cited, including, e.g., Exod. 21:10, 22:13, 40:37; Deut. 24:12.

10. The combination of the negative and interrogative following a syntactically unmarked conditional clause is found in Num. 12:14 (‘And (= if) her father had spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days?’) and 2 Kgs. 5:13 (‘[If] the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?’). For further discussion of the former verse, see section 3.6 below. Examples of את following a conditional clause elsewhere in the Bible are Jer. 38:15 (after a conditional clause with ים); Obad. 1:5; Ps. 44:21–22; Qoh. 6:6 (after a conditional clause with ויהי). The conditional clause may of course be negative as well, e.g., Gen. 44:23.

11. Interrogative את would presumably follow a left-dislocated constituent as well, although I am not aware of left-dislocated finite clauses containing the interrogative particle (aside from those with את). The position of the clausal adverb in verbless clauses featuring left-dislocation is different from its position in finite left-dislocated clauses. In the former, the clausal adverb את follows the left-dislocated element, e.g., ‘And the rest of the acts of Rehoboam, and all that he did, את they are written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah’ (1 Kgs. 14:29). On this formula see further section 3.5 below.

Although the interrogative combination and the clausal adverb אִם־הֲרֹב־דְּבָרִים have distinct meanings, it is actually quite difficult to distinguish the two on pragmatic grounds, due to the frequent use of interrogative אִם־הֲרֹב־דְּבָרִים in rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is a question that serves as a pragmatic assertion, implying its own answer. In contrast to the genuine question, a rhetorical question is not a request for information, and usually does not expect an answer. The polarity of the implied answer to a yes-no rhetorical question is the reverse of the polarity of the question, as illustrated by (9):\(^\text{15}\)

(9) Job 11:2

Is a multitude of words unanswerable? Must a loquacious person be right?

The verse contains a pair of rhetorical questions, the first negative, with a positive implied answer (“A multitude of words can be answered”) and the second positive, with a negative implied answer (“A loquacious person is not [necessarily] right”).\(^\text{16}\)

Since negative rhetorical questions imply positive answers, it is generally not clear when אִם is the clausal adverb marking an explicit assertion, as opposed to the interrogative-negative combination marking a rhetorical question implying the same assertion. A typical example is (10):

(10) Gen. 42:22

And Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy,’/אָמַרְתִּי אֲלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר רְאוּבֵן אֲלֵיכֶם בַיֶּלֶד I told you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy,’ and you did not listen!”

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13. Additional examples are Isa. 29:17 and Obad. 1:8.
16. The אִם—ך sequence often occurs in pairs of parallel, synonymous questions (Joüon-Muraoka, Grammar, 575), e.g., verb אִם־הֲרֹב—ך in Gen. 42:22. "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to rule over us?" (Gen. 37:8).
Reuben’s statement can be understood as a rhetorical question, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong?’” Alternatively, it can be read as an assertion with the clausal adverb: “וַיָּלְךָ֣ אֶלָּא, יְמַלֵּךְ שָׁמַּיִם! I told you, ‘Do no wrong.’” Taken either way, the message is the same: “I told you not to harm him!”

Although demonstrating that הֲלֹא is the interrogative-negative combination is often impossible, I argue here that there are a number of discourse contexts in which interpretation as the clausal adverb is the only plausible alternative; i.e., when הֲלֹא occurs in a context in which a rhetorical question would be atypical in BH and other languages, it can be assumed that the clausal adverb is involved. Speakers use rhetorical questions when they consider the implied assertion of the question to be obvious.17 The rhetorical question is often used as a persuasive device: the speaker attempts to convince the addressee to accept the implied answer to the question by suggesting that the answer is obvious to everyone except the addressee.18 In classical BH prose contexts that do not involve obvious information, nor are persuasive in nature, הֲלֹא is best understood as the clausal adverb.

A less conclusive indicator of the clausal adverb, but one that can be cited as subsidiary support, is the interchangeability of הֲלֹא and וַיָּלְךָ in a given discourse context. Since וַיָּלְךָ does not appear in questions, genuine or rhetorical, interchangeability with הֲלֹא supports interpretation of וַיָּלְךָ as non-interrogative.19

In some cases, a context that has been established as non-interrogative on pragmatic grounds also happens to exhibit instances of וַיָּלְךָ that are syntactically identifiable as clausal adverbs. In such cases the syntactic evidence provides independent corroboration of the pragmatic analysis.

### 3.1 Announcements

In announcements, וַיָּלְךָ is best taken as non-interrogative:20

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20. See also Croatto (“L’article hébreu,” 396) on 1 Sam. 10:1.
(11) Judg. 4:6

ותשלחה החור מבריכי נציקות טעם עליון ותאמרו: "אל הוהי ישראל" (יַלְלֹא)
בְּהַר וּמָשַׁכְתָּלֵךְ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
יִצִוָה
והי שלח נפתלי בן אבינו’am לברק
וַתִּקְרָא וַתִּשְׁלַח זְבֻלוּן:
וּמִבְּנֵי נַפְתָּלִי מִבְּנֵי איש אֲלָפִים עֲשֶׂ֤רֶת עִמָּךְ
וְלָקַחְתָּ תָב֔וּר

And she sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "the Lord, the God of Israel has commanded: Go and march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun."

(12) 1 Sam. 20:37

וָהָלְאָה׃
מִמְּךָ הַחֵצִים
וַיֹּאמֶר

And Jonathan called after the boy and said, "Behold the arrow is beyond you."

(13) 1 Sam. 23:19

וַיַעֲל֤וּ הַיְשִׁימֽוֹן׃

And some Ziphites went up to Saul in Gibeah and said, "David is hiding among us in the strongholds of Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon." 21

It is implausible that an announcement would be phrased as a rhetorical question. Announcements typically present information not previously known to the speaker, and not obvious in any sense. The non-interrogative interpretation of לֹא in announcements is supported by the interchange of לֹא with הנה in this discourse context. For example, in the passage containing Jonathan’s report of what he planned to say to the boy, parallel to the utterance in (12), לֹא is replaced by הנה:

(14) 1 Sam. 20:22

וְאִם־כֹּה

And if I say to the lad, "Behold the arrows are beyond you" 22

3.2 Internal Realization

When לֹא marks a realization of the speaker it should be understood as non-interrogative. In this admittedly rare context the utterance with לֹא expresses an internal thought:

(15) Deut. 31:17

וַאֲמוֹת בְּיָם הָהָה וַאֲלַלְּכֵן עֵלֶּךָ עַל־בֵּרֵיאָה אֲלַלְּכֵן בַּרְכֹּתֵךְ

And they shall say on that day, "It is because my God is not in my midst that these evils have befallen me."

(16) Isa. 44:20

לֹא יֵאמְרָה לָנוּ הַיֶּדֶר בְּכֶסֶם

And he doesn’t say, "The thing in my right hand is a fraud!"

Since it contains new information, the לֹא clause can hardly be regarded as a rhetorical question.

21. See also the similar 1 Sam. 26:1.
22. Additional examples of announcements with הנה include, e.g., Gen. 48:2; Judg. 13:10; 1 Sam. 13:33, 23:1, 25:14; 2 Sam. 4:10, 18:10, 19:8; 1 Kgs. 2:39.
3.3 Predictions

Like announcements and internal speech, predictions typically involve new, non-obvious information. Examples of הֲלֹא in prophetic predictions are shown in (17) and (18). 23 The non-interrogative interpretation is corroborated in both examples by syntactic evidence, although the citations are admittedly from outside the classical BH corpus: in both verses הֲלֹא precedes a preposed constituent or constituents:24

(17) Ezek. 38:14

Thus says the Lord GOD: “הֲלֹא on that day when my people Israel are living securely, you will take note.”

(18) Ezek. 26:15

Thus says the Lord GOD to Tyre: “הֲלֹא the coastlands shall quake at the sound of your fall, when the wounded groan, when slaughter goes on within you.”

Predictions exhibit a general parallel between הֲלֹא and הִנֵּה, although predictions with הִנֵּה generally concern the immediate future and contain a participle rather than a finite verb; among numerous examples are Gen. 6:13, 17; 9:9.

3.4 Answers

When הֲלֹא occurs in the answer to a question or an inquiry, as in (19) and (20), it appears to be non-interrogative:25

(19) 1 Sam. 29:3

The Philistine officers asked, “Who are those Hebrews?” And Achish answered the Philistine officers, “הֲלֹא that is David, the servant of King Saul of Israel, who has been with me for a year or more.”

(20) 2 Sam. 11:3

And the king sent and inquired about the woman, and he said, “הֲלֹא that is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite.”

In neither example is the answer to the question obvious to the addressee, nor is there any reason to think that it should be. Thus a rhetorical question would not appear to be an appropriate response to the questions preceding הֲלֹא. It is true that the use of rhetorical questions as answers is known from other languages, as in the following:

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23. Additional examples include Isa. 29:17; Ezek. 24:25, 38:14; Obad. 1:8.
24. In Isa. 29:17 and Obad. 1:8 הֲלֹא precedes a constituent connected to its clause by a conjunction (see section 2 above).
The antagonistic tone of B’s answer is noteworthy. According to Schmidt-Radefeldt, a speaker who uses a rhetorical question to imply the answer to a question “does this to express a propositional attitude of irritation or even of anger about the fact of being asked a question which he for his part finds completely inappropriate.” Such a challenging tone would be inappropriate in the context of the biblical occurrences. In (19) Achish wants his officers to trust David, and would naturally adopt an appeasing tone, rather than a confrontational one. Similarly, it seems unlikely that the answer to a king’s inquiry, as in (20), would be phrased in an antagonistic manner. It can be concluded that הֲלֹא in these examples is not interrogative and marks an assertion rather than a rhetorical question.

The non-interrogative interpretation of הֲלֹא is also probable when a speaker answers his own question:

(22) Exod. 4:11

"And the Lord said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? אֲנִי הֲלֹֽא it is I, the Lord.""

The הֲלֹא clause in (22) can theoretically be rendered as a rhetorical question, “Is it not I, the Lord?” In this and other similar examples, the answer expressed in the הֲלֹא clause is obvious, lending plausibility to a rhetorical interpretation. Nevertheless, comparison to other languages suggests that (22) is best understood as containing an assertive, rather than an interrogative answer. An example from English is shown below:

(23) Who do I support for President? Why, Barack Obama, of course!

In a slightly different type of question-answer sequence, הֲלֹא occurs after an affirmative yes-no rhetorical question:

(24) Jer. 7:19

"Is it Me they are vexing?" says the Lord. אֲנִי הֲלֹֽא it is themselves, to their own disgrace.”

In this and similar examples, the הֲלֹא clause does not answer the preceding rhetorical question, whose implied answer is simply אֲנִי. Instead, the הֲלֹא clause presents the correct alternative to a value implicitly rejected by the question. Thus the הֲלֹא clause

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27. Ibid., 388–89; see also Ilie (What Else Can I Tell You, 51), who states that rhetorical questions functioning as answers are often argumentative.
28. Additional examples are Exod. 33:16; 1 Sam. 9:20, 29:4; 2 Sam. 11:21, 16:19; Isa. 42:24, 45:21; Mic. 1:5 (2x).
29. Adapted from Pope (“Questions,” 45). A similar usage is known in French and German, as noted by Schmidt-Radefeldt (“Rhetorical Questions,” 379). For a comparable interpretation of Biblical question-answer sequences, see Brongers (“Some Remarks,” 185) on Mic. 1:5 שֹֽׁמְר֔וֹן הֲלוֹא מִֽי־פֶ֣שַׁעיַעֲקֹ֗ב, which he renders as “What is the crime of Jacob? Samariah, of course!”
30. Additional examples of this type are Num. 12:2; 2 Kgs. 18:27; Isa. 36:12, 58:5–6; Ezek. 18:23, 25, 29; 1 Chr. 19:3.
in (24) substitutes “themselves” for the implicitly rejected “Me.” Here too an interrogative interpretation, “Is it not themselves?” is theoretically possible, although the non-interrogative interpretation seems more probable, given the general similarity to the question-answer sequence illustrated in (22).

3.5 Third-person Narrative

In addition, הֲלֹא appears repeatedly in a fixed formula in Kings in narrative texts related in the third person, as illustrated by (23):

(23) 1 Kgs. 11:41

וְכָלָ֥ה דַּבְרֵ֖י נִלְחַֽם דִּבְרֵ֣י מָלָ֑ךְ

And the other events of Solomon’s reign, and all that he did, and his wisdom, הֲלֹא they are recorded in the book of the Annals of Solomon.

In examples like (23), הֲלֹא is clearly not interrogative, as rhetorical questions do not otherwise occur in third-person narrative (as distinguished from dialogue or second-person monologue).31 The non-interrogative nature of הֲלֹא in third-person narrative is confirmed by its interchangeability with הֵם, For example, הֲלֹא is replaced by הְמוּנה (הֵם plus an enclitic 3rd pers. pronoun) in a number of occurrences of the formula in Kings.32

(24) 1 Kgs. 14:19

וְכָלָ֥ה דַּבְרֵ֖י יַרְוָאָֽם דִּבְרֵ֣י מָלָ֑ךְ

And the other events of Jeroboam’s reign, how he fought and how he ruled, behold they are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Israel.33

In the corresponding verses in Chronicles the formula regularly has הֵם, although there are a few cases with הֲלֹא (2 Chr. 9:29; 12:15), and one occurrence with הֵם הֲלֹא together (2 Chr. 25:26).34

3.6 Justifications

The interpretation of הֲלֹא in justificational clauses is less straightforward than the discourse contexts discussed above. By justification I mean a statement put forth in support of a second, often implicit assertion. Often הֲלֹא justifies an assertion implied by a directive:

31. To speakers of Modern Hebrew, a language in which הֲלֹא functions as a justificational adverb (“after all”), the non-interrogative nature of הֲלֹא in such passages is obvious. In fact, a citation by this author of the traditional King James translation of this passage (“And the rest of the acts of Solomon, and all that he did, and his wisdom, [are] they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon?”) triggered unexpected laughter from the audience at a conference of Israeli linguists in 2004. On הֲלֹא in Modern Hebrew, see M. Ariel, “Discourse Markers and Form-Function Correlations,” in A. H. Jucker and Y. Ziv, eds., Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theory (Amsterdam: 1998), 234, 237, 249.

32. Additional examples are 2 Kgs. 15:11, 15, 26, 31. See also הֲלֹא כְּתוּבִּים עַל־סֵ֣פֶר דִּבְרֵ֥י מֶלְאָֽךְ מֶלֶךְ יִרְמָ֑י (Josh. 10:13) vs. הֲלֹא כְּתוּבָ֖ה עַל־סֵ֣פֶר דִּבְרֵ֥י מֶלֶךְ יִרְמָ֑י “Behold it is written in the Book of Jashar” (2 Sam. 1:18).

33. On the position of the clausal adverb הֲלֹא in verbless clauses like this one see n. 11 above. Notice that the clausal adverb הֲלֹא in (24) occupies the same position as הֲלֹא in (23).

34. BH3 notes that several mss., the Targum, and the parallel text in 2 Kgs. 14:18 read הֵם הֲלֹא.
“And the whole land is before you. Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south, and if you go south, I will go north.”

Here לֹא justifies an assertion implied by the directive, “You should separate from me.” In the next example לֹא justifies a rhetorical question:

And Saul replied, “לֹא I am only a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my clan is the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin. And (= so) why did you say such things to me?”

The justified assertion is “You should not have said such things to me,” implied by the rhetorical “why” question.

A number of scholars have argued that לֹא is non-interrogative when it is used for justification. As noted by Steiner, there is a striking similarity between justificational לֹא and a parallel use of וַיֹּאמֶר. In (27), below, וַיֹּאמֶר justifies a directive, and in (28) וַיֹּאמֶר justifies a rhetorical question.

And Abimelech said, “Behold my land is before you; settle wherever you please.”

He said to him, “Please my lord, how can I deliver Israel? Behold my clan is the humblest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s household.”

35. Additional examples of לֹא justifying a directive (a command, request or suggestion) include Gen. 13:9, 19:20, 37:13; Judg. 9:38, 15:2; 2 Sam. 13:28 (with מִכָּל־מִשְׁפָּחָה); 1 Kgs. 1:11–12; Isa. 44:8, 51:9–10; Ruth 2:9, 3:2–3; 1 Chr. 21:17, 22:18–19. For further discussion of these and more complex text-linguistic structures involving justificational לֹא, see A. Moshavi, “לֹא as a Discourse Marker of Justification in Biblical Hebrew,” Hebrew Studies 48 (2007), 177–86, at 180–86.

36. Examples of לֹא justifying one or more rhetorical questions include Gen. 4:6–7; 27:29, 44:15; Exod. 14:11–12; Num. 22:37; Deut. 32:6; Judg. 11:7, 15:11; 1 Sam. 1:8, 6:6, 15:17–19; 26:15; 2 Sam. 2:26, 11:10, 20; 1 Kgs. 2:42–43; 2 Kgs. 4:28; Mal. 2:10. For further discussion see Moshavi, “לֹא,” 177–80.

37. Steiner, Review, 149; see also Kaddari, Dictionary, 544; Moshavi, “לֹא.” Fassberg points out a recurrent parallel between לֹא and כַּדָּבָר; see S. E. Fassberg, Studies in Biblical Syntax (Jerusalem, 1994), 46–47 [Hebrew].


39. Additional representative examples of נַא justifying a directive include Gen. 16:2, 6, 24:51, 38:23; Exod. 1:9–10; Num. 22:5–6, 11; Josh. 9:25; 1 Sam. 8:5, 18:17; 1 Sam. 28:21–22; 1 Kgs. 17:9, 22:13; examples of נַא justifying a rhetorical question include, e.g., Gen. 26:9; Num. 22:32–33; 1 Sam. 21:15, 24:9–10; 2 Sam. 18:11. For further details see Moshavi, “לֹא.”
Notice the similarity in content between (25) and (27), and between (26) and (28). Syntactic evidence confirms that justificational משא לשון is often non-interrogative. When a justificational משא לשון clause contains a preposed element, משא לשון usually occurs in front of the preposed element, in the characteristic position of the clausal adverb. In the following examples, the משא לשון clauses justify the rhetorical questions that follow:

(29) Judg. 11:7

וַאֲמַרְתְּ אֵלָיו ךְ לָכֶֽם׃

And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “לֵאמֹר why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?”

(30) 1 Kgs. 1:13

לִפְגֹּא הֲלֹא יֹאמַר יִפְתָּח אֶל הַלָּוֶדֶת אֲשֶׁר יָשֶׁב לָכֶם לְזִקְנֵי בָּאתֶם וַתְּגָרְשׁוּנִי שְׂנֵאתֶ֣ם צַ֥ר יִפְתָּח לְזִקְנֵ֣י בָּאתֶ֤ם׃

Go to King David and say to him, “לֵאמֹר why, O Lord king, swore to your maidservant, saying ‘Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit upon my throne.’ ( = so) why has Adonijah become king?”

Despite these points of evidence, it is likely that some justificational משא לשון clauses are actually rhetorical questions. The use of rhetorical questions to express a premise supporting the conclusion of an argument is a well-known phenomenon in other languages, e.g., “You should take an umbrella. Do you want to catch cold?”

The conclusion, “You should take an umbrella,” is justified by a rhetorical question implying the assertion “You don’t want to catch cold.”

In Biblical Hebrew the justificational use of rhetorical questions is widespread. By expressing the premise as a rhetorical question, the speaker establishes common ground between speaker and addressee (“Clearly, we both agree on the obvious fact that . . .”) which is then used to advance the argument. An example of a positive yes-no question used for justification is:

40. Additional examples of justificational משא לשון that can be identified as the clausal adverb on syntactic grounds (see section 2 above) include Gen. 4:7, 20:5, 31:15; Josh. 22:20; Judg. 4:14, 11:24; 1 Sam. 6:6, 15:17; 1 Kgs. 1:13.


The conclusion of the argument is the assertion “Sarah should not have scoffed at the news that she could bear a child,” implied by a rhetorical “why” question, “Why did Sarah laugh?” The premise supporting this assertion, “Nothing is too great for the Lord,” is implied by the positive rhetorical question, “Is anything too great for the Lord?”

Yes-no rhetorical questions like the one in (31) show that some justificational clauses may be negative rhetorical questions. In at least one case syntactic evidence shows that this is the correct interpretation:

(32) Num. 12:14

And (= if) her father had spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.

The conditional sentence containing אֲלֵיה serves as justification for the directives that follow. If אֲלֵיה represented the clausal adverb, it would be expected to precede the protasis, yielding אֲלֵיה אָבִיהָ יָרֹק מִח֣וּץ. Since אֲלֵיה actually follows the protasis, it appears that the conditional sentence is a negative rhetorical question, stressing the obviousness of the premise: “Would she not be shut out for seven days if her father had spit in her face?” This example casts doubt on the blanket assumption that clauses like those in Gen. 13:9 and 1 Sam. 9:21 (examples 25 and 26 above), in which the syntactic structure does not unequivocally point to either interpretation of אֲלֵיה, are necessarily assertions with the clausal adverb rather than negative rhetorical questions.

4 The Core Pragmatic Function of the Clausal Adverb אֲלֵיה

The varied nature of the discourse contexts in which the clausal adverb אֲלֵיה appears makes it difficult to determine its core pragmatic function. I do not attempt here to offer

43. Additional representative examples include Gen. 4:9, 50:19 (following causal יָרֵא); Exod. 14:11; Josh. 22:16–17; 2 Sam. 12:23; 2 Kgs. 5:7, 18:32–33, 19:11–12; Ruth 1:11. A notable phenomenon in poetry is the three-part structure featuring a doubled yes-no question which justifies a preceding or following rhetorical question, e.g., לְהַעֶ֙בֶד֙ אִם־יְלִ֥יד יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל אַל־לֹֽא׃ Why has he been given over to plunder?” (Jer. 2:14; additional examples include, e.g., 2 Sam. 19:36, 43; Num. 11:11–12; Isa. 50:2; Jer. 2:31, 14:19, 22:28, 49:1; Mic. 4:9). For discussion see A. D. Singer, Review of “The Legend of King Keret: A Canaanite Epic of the Bronze Age,” by H. L. Ginsberg, BJPES 14 (1947), 55–60 [Hebrew]; idem, “On a Certain Type of Interrogative Sentence in Biblical Hebrew,” World Congress of Jewish Studies Summer 1947 (Jerusalem, 1952), 1.109–12 [Hebrew]; Y. Avisar, “The Pattern גֵּרֶה in the Book of Jeremiah,” Be’er Mikra 16 (1971), 152–70 [Hebrew]; idem, “Double and Triple Question Patterns in the Bible and Ugaritic,” in B. Z. Luria, ed., Zer LiGeruvot: The Zablan Shazar Jubilee Volume (Jerusalem, 1973), 421–64 [Hebrew].

44. See n. 10 above.

a definitive pragmatic description, but rather to comment on some of the proposals that have been made thus far.

As noted above, most scholars who discuss the clausal adverb בִּדְמוֹן believe that the particle is asseverative, meaning something like “indeed” or “surely.” Asseverative adverbs belong to the semantic system of epistemic modality, which indicates the speaker’s strength of commitment to what he is saying. Some modal expressions express doubt (e.g., the verb may and adverbs such as perhaps and possibly) while others express certainty (e.g., the verb must and adverbs such as indeed, certainly, and definitely). In order to assess the asseverative interpretation of בִּדְמוֹן, it is worthwhile examining the characteristic pragmatic functions of certainty adverbs and similar expressions. In English, the modal verb must used epistemically (i.e., referring to certainty rather than obligation) has the paradoxical effect of pragmatically weakening the assertion, implying that the assertion is the product of inference, rather than direct observation or knowledge. Thus the modal assertion It must be raining is epistemically weaker than the simple assertion It is raining. The latter assertion implies that the speaker knows for a fact that it is raining, while the former implies that he has merely deduced this information from circumstantial evidence (“What else could explain the mud on the floor?”).

English certainty adverbs are used somewhat differently, not carrying the implication that the assertion is only an inference. Thus one can argue that It is certainly raining is a pragmatically stronger assertion than It is raining. Nevertheless, on a deeper level, the use of a certainty adverb reflects a perception on the part of the speaker that the assertion needs strengthening, typically because it is likely to encounter doubt or skepticism on the part of the addressee. Thus certainty adverbs are frequently used in assertions that cannot be objectively verified at the time of speech, such as subjective assessments (e.g., This is certainly the most remarkable book to have been written in the last decade) and predictions and promises regarding the future (e.g., I will definitely be home by 10:00 P.M.) They are used in response to a challenge by the addressee regarding the veracity of an assertion, as in the following interchange: A: John is at home now. B: I don’t think so. A: Oh, he certainly is. They can be used to confirm a suspicion or accusation: The house had indeed been left unlocked on the night of the robbery. Yet another use is in concessive structures: It is certainly a good film, but I can’t bring myself to watch it.

BH certainty adverbs such as והלא אמְנָה, והלא אֻמְנָם, and והלא אָמְנָם appear to be pragmatically similar to their English counterparts; biblical parallels can be drawn for many of the uses mentioned above. For example, והלא indicates that the assertion is a logical inference in Exod. 2:13. והלא occurs in a prediction in 1 Kgs. 11:2. והלא is used in Gen. 20:2 in response to a challenge to the veracity of the speaker’s previous assertion. In

49. Example from Palmer, Mood and Modality, 87.
Josh. 7:20 הֲלוֹא is used to confirm an accusation. The concessive use of הֲלוֹא is found in 2 Kgs. 19:17 and Ruth 3:12.

Let us now consider the proposal that הֲלוֹא is a certainty adverb. The asseverative interpretation is possible in predictions, such as (17) and (18) above. It is also plausible in justifications, such as (25) and (26) above. By adding a certainty adverb that stresses his commitment to the premise of an argument, the speaker rhetorically strengthens the conclusion of the argument, e.g., *Take your umbrella – surely you don’t want to catch cold!*

In other discourse contexts in which the clausal adverb הֲלוֹא occurs, however, the asseverative interpretation would appear to have anomalous pragmatic effects. Consider הֲלוֹא in announcements, as in 1 Sam. 20:37 אָכֵן הֲלוֹא אָמְנָם מִמְּךָ (see [12] above). If הֲלוֹא is a certainty adverb, Jonathan’s statement either sounds like an inference (“The arrow must be beyond you”), or a defensive statement expecting opposition (“Really, the arrow is beyond you”). Either reading seems inappropriate in context. The use of a certainty adverb in answers, such as (25) אָמְנָם הֲלוֹא אָכֵן מִמְּךָ (2 Sam. 11:3; [19] above), would also be anomalous unless the speaker were trying to hedge his answer (“That must be Bathsheba”) or is anticipating skepticism (“That is certainly Bathsheba”). There is no reason for him to do either of these things.

Finally, הֲלוֹא in third-person narrative can hardly be understood as asseverative, considering the fact that indisputably asseverative adverbs, such as אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָכֵן, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְנָם, אָכֵן, אָמְن

In these various discourse contexts casts doubt on the relevance of this interpretation even for the aforementioned contexts in which it is apparently compatible.

Several scholars have asserted that the clausal adverb הֲלוֹא is restricted to presenting information already known to the addressee. 51 This characterization fits most instances of justificational הֲלוֹא, but does not apply to the use of הֲלוֹא in announcements, realizations, predictions and answers, all of which typically involve new information. 52 It should also be noted that even in many justificational הֲלוֹא clauses there is often no compelling reason to assume that the information is known to the addressee. 53

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50. Another asseverative particle הֲלוֹא, developed in the late biblical period into a contrastive particle that can be used in third-person narrative, as in 2 Chr. 1:4.

51. See Steiner (Review, 149), as well as BDB, 520, which writes that non-interrogative הֲלוֹא declares “with some rhetorical emphasis what is, or might be, well known.” A. Van Selms (“Haló in the Courier’s Language in Ancient Israel,” Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies [Jerusalem, 1967], 1.hb:137–40), who considers all occurrences of הֲלוֹא to be interrogative, supports the position that הֲלוֹא marks known information; see n. 52 below. A similar claim has been made with regard to the clausal adverb הֲלוֹא in Mishnaic Hebrew (U. Mor, “דַּֽעְתָּא תַּֽיָּא אַלְפֵּי דָּוִד תַּֽיָּא: Two Presentative Particles in Mishnaic Hebrew according to Ms. Ebr. 32.2 to Sifré on Numbers,” Leshonenu 68 [2006], 227 [Hebrew]), as well as הֲלוֹא in Modern Hebrew (Ariel, “Discourse Markers,” 234).

52. Van Selms (“Haló”) argues that in such cases the speaker has phrased his answer or his announcement as if it were known information for reasons of politeness (e.g., as not to offend a king, who is supposed to be omniscient). This explanation seems farfetched and is not applicable to all instances of the clausal adverb, e.g., Jonathan’s speech to his servant in 1 Sam. 20:37 ([12] above). A similar explanation is offered by Brongers (“Some Remarks,” 178). His rendering of הֲלוֹא in such passages as Josh. 10:13 as “as you know” is surprising, considering the fact that these texts are otherwise exclusively third-person narratives.

53. See, e.g., Gen. 4:6–7, 37:13, 44:4–5; Judg. 4:14, 15:2; 1 Sam. 1:8; 2 Kgs. 6:32.
The frequent association between justificational נַחֲלַה and known information can be explained as stemming not from a restriction on the use of the particle, but from a natural tendency to justify a claim on the basis of information already accepted by the addressee. Most instances of justificational נַחֲלַה involve known information as well, although this particle is certainly not restricted to known information.

A different interpretation of נַחֲלַה is offered by Blau, who views the clausal adverb as a presentative, grouping it with הִנֵּה and הֵן “behold.”54 As shown above, a parallel between clausal adverb נַחֲלַה and הִנֵּה is attested in a broad variety of discourse contexts, including announcements, predictions, third-person narrative, and justifications. Although נַחֲלַה is not found in the answers to questions, there is no apparent reason that a presentative could not be appropriately used in that context. The best pragmatic characterization of נַחֲלַה, therefore, appears to be a presentative particle. A matter for further research is the identification of the features shared by the various contexts in which both נַחֲלַה and הִנֵּה occur, and the identification of the kinds of contexts in which one or the other particles does not appear.

5. Conclusion

It has been shown that נַחֲלַה is non-interrogative when it occurs in a number of discourse contexts, including announcements, realizations, predictions, answers to questions, and third-person narrative. Justificational נַחֲלַה is frequently non-interrogative as well. The non-interrogative interpretation of נַחֲלַה in these contexts can generally be established on pragmatic and/or syntactic grounds. The clausal adverb נַחֲלַה is minimally characterized as a presentative particle the uses of which bears a striking resemblance to those of הִנֵּה.